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# Recollections of Public Men.



DEWOLF.



# RECOLLECTIONS OF PUBLIC MEN:

A PAPER

READ BEFORE THE CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

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BY

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## RECOLLECTIONS OF PUBLIC MEN.

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It is impossible to relate personal recollections without making a free use of the first personal pronoun; and I hope, therefore, that it will not be considered egotistical if I now and then appropriate one on this occasion. Trusting that I shall not do as Gov. Kinney of St. Clair County, once accused Gov. Edwards of doing, *viz.:* using all the "*great I's up!*"

In the year 1820, when about nine years old, I had the great honor and satisfaction of being introduced to John Adams—the signer of the Declaration of Independence—the renowned patriot who, when he signed that great State paper, uttered these immortal words: "The die is now cast. I have passed the Rubicon; to sink or swim—live or die—survive or perish with my country is my unalterable determination. It is my living sentiment; and, with the blessing of God, it shall be my dying sentiment. Independence now and Independence forever."

My grandfather, the late John Marston of Massachusetts, having been an active participant in many of the stormy scenes of the Revolution, but few years younger than Mr. Adams, and a near neighbor, was on terms of intimacy with him, so much so, indeed, that I have heard they dined together on Saturdays for nearly thirteen years. Their repast on such occasions being boiled codfish—the Saturday dinner of New England fifty years ago.

My parents being on a visit to my grandfather, had taken me with them; and, while in Quincy, my father was invited to visit the venerated sage. I was permitted to accompany him. Mr. Adams was then about ninety years old, and though frail in body, was active and prompt as to his mental powers. I shall never forget his appearance as he received his visitors. He occupied an old-fashioned New-England easy-chair, such

as I never saw out of New England, and seldom out of Massachusetts. Its ample width, high back, and comfortable arms appeared large enough to hold two, were it necessary; covered with a simple but attractive chintz, it seemed the very seat for an old man to take his rest. He still retained much of that manly beauty and dignity of manner for which he was remarkable in youth. After my father had been presented, and some considerable conversation had passed between the elder visitors, Mr. Adams called me to his side, and, taking my hand in his, affectionately held it while continuing conversation with my father, saying very little to me till we were about to depart. He then asked me some simple questions, and among the rest:—"Where do you go to school, my son?" I answered, I had never been to school. Apparently, with some surprise, he continued, "but you know how to read?" I replied, "Yes, sir," and he added, "spell, write, cipher, and some geography?" "Yes, sir." "Who taught you?" he inquired. The reply was, "*my mother*." He laid his wrinkled and flabby hand on my head and, in tones which still fill my ears, said, "God bless all our mothers." The lines of a long-extended old age were written on his brow, but there was a peacefulness in his looks that made an impression on me, even at my then early age, which I can never forget.

But a few years after, on the 4th of July, 1826, he passed away. His last words being, "Independence forever!" He died on the anniversary of that day of which he said in a letter to Mrs. Adams, "I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this Continent to the other, from this time forward for evermore." Mr. Adams lived to see his country full high advanced among the nations of the earth. His son, a President of our Republic. His ambition gratified, and fully aware of the love and respect of his countrymen. A grandson has since represented our Nation at the most important court of Europe;

while his great and great-great grandchildren are handing down to the third and fourth generations, his name, fair and untarnished. Thus far, up to this time, his youngest descendant may look back through a long line of illustrious ancestry without blot on their name or stain on their escutcheon.

COMMODORE CHARLES MORRIS.

It was once my good fortune to hear Commodore, then Capt. Morris, of the U. S. Navy, relate at my father's table an account of the battle of the U. S. frigate *Constitution*, often called "Old Ironsides," with the British frigate *Guerriere*, fought on the 3d day of August, A.D. 1812. The *Constitution* was commanded by Capt. Isaac Hull; Lieut. Morris being the next officer in command. It is said that when the American came in view of the British ship, Capt. Dacres, in command of the latter, called his men together and made them a speech, such as he thought would inspire them with the courage wanted for the occasion. "My men," said the bold Briton, "there comes a Yankee Droger, fresh from the West Indies, loaded with rum, lemons, and molasses. I will give you twenty minutes to take her, and then we shall have plenty of blackstrap on board." As the ships approached each other, but when yet some miles apart, Capt. Hull retired to his cabin, saying that not a gun must be fired until he came on deck and gave the orders. When at long distance, the *Guerriere* commenced discharging her cannon, and as each successive explosion took place, our men grew more and more excited and eager for the conflict. At last some of the enemy's shot struck our rigging, and our tars muttered because no orders to fire were heard. Very much excited himself, Lieut. Morris went below and said, "Capt. Hull, I fear I can not restrain my men. The shot from the enemy are beginning to tell." The old commander rose slowly from his table where he had been preparing some despatches, and taking the Lieutenant by his arm, walked up the cabin-stairs, saying as he went, "when we can see the third roll of her copper, we will let her have it." As they reached the deck, the *Guerriere* was seen in the near distance; her flags and streamers waving in the wind; an occasional gun being discharged; and every

preparation made for a deadly conflict. The *Constitution* had been cleared for action. The men were standing by their guns panting for the fight, and straining their longing eyes toward the officers for the coveted command. At this moment, the British frigate rose proudly on the crest of a wave, and as she settled, rolled up the third streak of her copper. The order to fire was given, and in thirty minutes Dacres struck his flag, and soon after came on board of "Old Ironsides," wounded though he was, to tender his sword. Capt. Hull complimented him on his gallantry and bade him retain the weapon which he could wear so gracefully.

I can not forbear quoting here the lines of Holmes, written when there was a talk of selling "Old Ironsides" for a merchantman: Rather

"Nail to the mast her holy flag,  
Set every threadbare sail,  
And give her to the god of storms,  
The lightning and the gale!"

As a Rhode Islander, I remember with pride, Tristram Burges, who represented his State in Congress from 1826, some three or four terms. He was a man of fine classical education. Eloquence, wit, and poetry were at his command; and as the Rhode-Island Bar of his day; and as Randolph of Roanoke, McDuffie of South Carolina, Hardin of Kentucky, and Cambreleng of New York, were made to feel that wit was like the piercing of a lancet. The Bible, Shakespeare, and the ancient classics, were at his tongue's end; and selecting the gems, he scattered them with a lavish hand. Owing to the peculiar contour of his face and the loss of hair he was called the bald eagle of the House; and well did he tower in his pride of place, fearing no mousing owl to hawk at and bring him down.

With your permission, I will relate a political anecdote or two of Mr. Burges. While Mr. Randolph was our minister at St. Petersburg in 1830, his conduct was severely criticised, and by none more severely than by Mr. Burges, in a speech before the House. Mr. Cambreleng of New York, defended Mr. Randolph, and indulged in bitter invective against the



old eagle. He praised Mr. Randolph in the most extravagant manner, and wound up by saying, "Mr. Speaker, when we last heard from our minister in Russia, he was sick nigh unto death; perhaps, while we are discussing the question before the House, he may be in his grave, and, if so, I trust he may be suffered to rest there in peace, undisturbed by the prowling hyena or the bald vulture." He then went on with an eloquent panegyric, saying, "the illustrious minister would be remembered and cherished in the hearts of his countrymen when his assailants and traducers were forgotten." The speech of the New-York statesman was one of the most withering pieces of invective sarcasm and irony Mr. Burges ever had to contend against. But he was equal to the occasion. In the course of his reply he exclaimed, "Mr. Speaker, the gentleman is as much out in his ornithology as in every thing else. It is not the vulture but the bird of Jove that is remarkable for his baldness, and when, sir, was the eagle, towering in his pride of place, hawked at and brought down by a mousing owl? I am not the first man who has been reviled for his baldness and grey hairs. Better men than I am have been reviled by men no better than he is. He whom we love to name the father of his country, the immortal Washington, was called a hoary-headed incendiary; Elisha, the prophet of God, coming home from the mission of his maker, streaming all over with the light of heaven, was followed by boys who cried, 'go up, thou bald-head.' And what was done with them, Mr. Speaker? Why, they were given to those animals that feed on offal." It is said some members were obliged to turn to their bibles before they could fully understand the orator.

He continued: "The gentleman says that our Minister at Russia will be remembered by his constituents. Sir, I doubt not he will be remembered—he will be remembered when many better Virginians are forgotten; he will be remembered when perhaps even the gentleman himself is forgotten; he will be remembered like the years of blight and mildew, while the years of plenty are forgotten." Then, referring to Mr. C., he added: "It has been said that what a man lacks in wit is often made up to him in hair. There will be no necessity for this

House to imitate a Roman senate and vote the gentleman from New York wherewith to cover his head. Nor is every man to be counted a Cæsar, who happens to have a wart on his nose." If it was rather rough to pounce upon his prey in this style, we must remember the mode of attack to which he had been subjected.

For readiness at *repartee* few men were his equal. A member of the House, opposed to him in politics, after his reply to Cambreleng, in going down the steps of the Capitol, said to him: "Burges, I had rather fall into the Devil's hands than yours." "Very likely," said the old man, "you are on better terms with him." At one Session, Mr. Burges arrived late at Washington and found all the best seats in the Hall of Representatives taken. The only seat he could secure was distant from the Speaker. Mr. Pierce, his colleague, was also his political opponent. On one occasion, Mr. Pierce was indulging in some severe remarks concerning Mr. Burges. The venerable old representative rose and said: "I will thank the gentleman, my colleague, to speak a little louder, I find it difficult to hear him." Several of the political friends of Pierce at once, half-rising in their seats, cried out, "Why, Mr. Speaker, we can hear him"—intimating that Burges did not want to hear. He at once replied, "Mr. Speaker, their ears are longer than mine are."

Perhaps no man could call another an ass in more unexceptional terms than did Mr. Burges, Mr. Daniels of Kentucky. Illustrating by the story of Baalam. Burges had made a speech on the tariff and was replied to by Barbour of Virginia and Daniels of Kentucky. Mr. Barbour was one of the most polished gentlemen and respected statesmen of his day. Mr. Daniels was a very able but rough congressman, even in his time. Mr. Barbour answered Mr. Burges in the most unexceptionable manner, with a *suaviter in modo* only equalled by the force of his argument.

Mr. Daniels continued the debate, dealing sledge-hammer blows at the head of his antagonist. When he came to reply, Mr. Burges compared the wit of his opponents in this way—"One was like lopping off a limb with a butcher's cleaver, the

other like the piercing of a lancet which was felt not till it reached the heart-core." He then took up the argument of Mr. Barbour and answered it in a masterly manner. Members crowded round his chair, and the senate chamber was left without a quorum, so eager were all parties to hear the "eagle scream," as a paper of the day had it. He complimented Mr. Barbour not only for the ability developed, but for his manners, which the speaker said, in the words of Earl Chesterfield, "most adorns knowledge and smooths its way through the world." After a speech of three hours in which he answered Mr. Barbour, he disposed of Mr. Daniels in this way, "Mr. Speaker, I shall not reply to the gentleman from Kentucky. His speech was neither more or less than the braying *without* the inspiration of a philosopher of the same school that once rebuked a prophet of antiquity." Mr. Burges was a ripe scholar. Some of his compositions are among the choice specimens of our Country's literature. To show how the moral may be illustrated by a comparison with the natural world. How the passions and the winds, the clouds and the melancholy of each are alike dark and tumultuary, let me quote still another passage from one of Mr. Burges' most powerful efforts. In his endeavors to sustain the tariff of 1828, he had aroused the energetic opposition of Randolph, McDuffie, Cambreleng, and a host of less distinguished men, who aided each other and hung upon him in the most annoying manner. It was on this occasion that he uttered this eloquent and highly poetical description. Those familiar with the character of the members of the House in those days, will perhaps see how he made use of his knowledge of Natural History. He began: "Mr. Chairman, he who has been at sea, knows that the inhabitants of that region sport only in foul weather. In the sunshine and the calm, when the world of water is level and unmoving, every tenant of the ocean is still and in repose. At such a time, if any cloud give promise of more than gentle airs, and the winds and the waters begin to hold controversy, then, suddenly, the whole population of the mighty realm is at once awake and in motion; not only the nimble dolphin gives his bright eye and dazzling side to the

sunshine; but the black, uncouth porpoise breaks above the water, and flounces and spouts and goes down again. The foul cormorant stretches his long lean wings and soars and sucks, piping shrill notes to the restless waves. The haglet and the cutwater spring into flight, and, dashing over the white crests of the lofty billows, scream their half-counter to the deep base of the mighty ocean."

Mr. Burges died at an advanced age, full of honors. He left but one child, a son, who gallantly laid down his life for his country in the late unnatural war. It was my good fortune to have a classmate in college who was a favorite nephew of Tristram Burges, now a distinguished Judge of the supreme court of Rhode Island. Many a pleasant hour have I passed in his company, both at the city residence and at "What Cheer," the country-house of his venerable uncle. "What Cheer" was the hailing welcome which an Indian gave Roger Williams when the latter was flying from his persecutors in Massachusetts. It was uttered by the savage just before Williams gained the western shore of the Seekonk River, where he laid the foundation of the first real Republic known to man. To use the words of the immortal Lincoln, "A government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Every Rhode Islander and descendant of Rhode Island remembers with pride the names of William Hunter, James Burril, and Asher Robbins, distinguished senators of Little Rhody. Mr. Hunter was one of the most commanding men that ever rose to address the Congress of our country, and his classic eloquence did not disappoint the expectations aroused by his personal attractions. Robbins, though lame and somewhat diminutive in person, was a fine speaker, and was esteemed the best Greek and Latin scholar of his day in Congress. To show the truth of the old adage,

"A little nonsense, now and then,  
Is relished by the best of men,"

I will relate an anecdote that Mr. Robbins loved to tell. He had one leg much shorter than the other, and when he walked he would rise up to six feet in height and at the next step sink to five feet six. On one occasion, as he was coming

down the parade in Newport, two jolly tars, just paid off, and feeling merry after a long voyage, were heard by him to say one to the other, "Jack, give the poor fellow a dollar; he has many ups and downs in this world." As I have said, it pleased the old senator, and he was fond of relating the story.

Of Mr. Burril, it is told, that when about to arise for the first time to address the Senate, his coat caught beneath his chair, prevented and brought him back suddenly to his seat. A senator in opposition said, loud enough for Mr. Burril to hear, "a bad omen." At once recovering himself, and casting his eye in the direction of his adversary, he quoted the words of Cato, "I fear no omen in my country's cause." He was one of the most eloquent and finished men that his State ever produced, but he died soon after being chosen to the Senate, and a bright, intellectual light was extinguished, too early for his own fame.

#### LEVI LINCOLN OF MASSACHUSETTS.

Governor Lincoln was a noble man, the son and brother of such men as Massachusetts and Maine, in the olden time, chose for their highest officials. Like the Adamses, his descendants look back through a long line of illustrious ancestry. Of him it might be said in words of Dryden: "His tribe were God Almighty's gentlemen." His home was the abode of genuine hospitality, made lovely by all the endearing charms of true refinement. I shall never forget the time when I once saw him on horseback in company with General Jackson and his cabinet, reviewing sixty thousand troops on Boston Common. Among many of the best-appearing men in the Nation, he rode the peer of the best. Here I may add that Gen. Jackson was considered one of the best horsemen of his time; some of his mighty deeds of valor were done in the saddle. Col. Forney says of him, that it has been said he literally rode into the presidency. At the time I saw him on Boston Common, surrounded as he was, and passing through the immense throng of his admiring citizens, he reminded one of the description given by Shakespeare of Bolingbroke's entrance into London:

“The crowd was cheering,  
 Whilst he, from one side to the other turning,  
 Bareheaded, lower than his proud steed's neck,  
 Bespake them thus,—‘I thank you, countrymen’:  
 And thus still doing, thus he pass'd along.”

In the year 1832, I had the pleasure of meeting at the mansion of Gov. Knight in Providence, R. I., some famous men: Daniel Webster, Willie P. Mangum of North Carolina, Felix Grundy of Tennessee, Martin VanBuren, George M. Dallas, and others. Mangum and Dallas were, in addition to their intellectual standing, possessed of commanding personal manly beauty.

In 1832, I had the honor of being one of what was then called Henry Clay's infant-school. This school, in the form of a National Young Men's Convention, consisting of some five hundred young men from all parts of the Union, met at Washington to confirm and ratify the nomination, then lately made at Baltimore, of Henry Clay and John Sargent, for president and vice-president of the United States. We voted informally that any man not over thirty-six years of age was a *young man*. I remember thinking we were rather stretching the matter, but, after battling the storms of life some fifty years, I can remember Hon. William Cost Johnson of Maryland, our president, as a much younger man than he looked to me then. At this period, the country was very much excited. Not only the great questions of the day, such as the tariff, the American system, the United States Bank, and others, were on the tongues of every one, but the cabinet of Gen. Jackson had been rent in twain by his determination to sustain Mrs. Gen. Eaton against a like determination, on the part of certain wives of some of his ministers, not to recognize her. Mr. Calhoun, then vice-president, the senators from South Carolina, and those from Mississippi, having withdrawn at least in part from the support of Gen. Jackson, were acting in concert with Mr. Clay and Mr. Webster on all National questions, controlling the Senate by a vote of 26 to 20. I have said the Nation was excited. None, but those who remember the period of which I speak, can fully realize the

extent of that excitement. The speeches of public men were reported at length and spread broadcast over the country (singular as it appears to me) to a much greater extent than now. There were giants in those days, and when such men as Clay, Calhoun, Webster; Bates and Benton of Missouri; Bell of Tennessee; Burges of Rhode Island; and McDuffie of South Carolina, shook their gauntlets at each other, the whole country stood on tiptoe with their ears open, ready to take up and prolong the sentiments of their favorite statesmen. My letters of introduction were to Mr. Clay, Mr. Webster, Mr. Calhoun, John Quincy Adams, and Gen. Jackson, and others of distinction. I remember them all with pleasure, especially Clay, Calhoun, and Jackson. The two latter had known my relatives, and made my calls upon them delightful from the easy gracefulness with which they received and entertained an unknown young man who had no claims upon them. Of Henry Clay, my recollections are pleasant beyond measure. He asked me a thousand questions easy for me to answer, showing a consideration for my youth and inexperience. The next morning, when I visited the senate-chamber, he caught sight of me, left his seat, met me in the most cordial manner, took me to the Library of Congress, showing me every attention of which I am sure I was not deserving at that early age. Thus his manner, founded no doubt in real kindness, was the key with which he unlocked the hearts of men, and won their lasting friendship. It was my good fortune to hear Mr. Clay in one of his masterly flights of eloquence. It has been called the snuff-box scene. It was a scene in which the vice-president—Mr. Calhoun and Mr. Clay were the actors. I dare not trust myself to describe it. On the part of Mr. Clay, it was the perfect illustration of Webster's definition of eloquence—it was action, Godlike action—or as Milton has described it, was like

“That resistless eloquence which  
 Wielded at will that fierce Democracie,  
 Shook the arsenal and fulminated over Greece,  
 To Macedon and Artaxerxes' throne.”

Besides the three great statesmen, Webster, Calhoun, and

Clay, the Senate was graced with men not much inferior to the great triumvirate. John Holmes of Maine, Isaac Hill of New Hampshire, Bates and Benton of Missouri, and Poin-dexter of Mississippi were of the illustrious body. Just previous to the time of which I am speaking, John Holmes had left the Democratic party. There had been, it was jocosely said, a political firm, what we should call now a ring, I suppose, composed of John Holmes, Isaac Hill, Felix Grundy, and the Devil. While Mr. Holmes was making one of his characteristic speeches, in which he ridiculed his former party, some senator, in a good-natured way, asked him if he still held any interest in the old firm. Holmes replied that as for himself he had withdrawn, but, casting a glance toward Mr. Grundy, added, "I am happy to believe that the remaining partners are doing a thriving business."

Coming down to later times, I change the scene to the West. Here, in Illinois, in 1835, I met a brilliant phalanx of young men just marshalling for the battle of life. I remember them with mingled feelings of pleasure and sadness. A few still linger on the stage of action. Not superfluous, but in their green old age, still fighting in the ranks or retired in honor from the field. Many have joined the innumerable caravan which moves

"To that mysterious realm where each doth take  
His silent chamber in the halls of death."

As I think of them they seem to pass before me in review,

"And so by some strange spell, the years,  
The half-forgotten years of glory,  
That slumber on their dusty biers,  
In the dim crypts of saddening story  
Awake with all their shadowy files  
Shape, spirit, name—in death immortal;  
The phantoms glide along the aisles,  
And ghosts steal in at yonder portal."

There were Lincoln and Douglas; Hardin and Baker; Shields and Bissell. There were Norman B. Judd, Newton D. Strong, Henry Eddy of Shawneetown, Lamborn, and the unfortunate but highly-gifted Linder. Who can recur to those times with-



out in memory listening to the ornate declamations of Samuel Lisle Smith; the classic eloquence of McDougall; the fine business talent of Samuel Snowden Hayes; the fiery denunciation of Lovejoy; the cogent arguments of Tracy; the ingenious efforts of John J. Brown; the legal accumen of Spring and Manniere; or the wit of Butterfield and Meeker. Alas! they have all gone by. Lincoln, he who had reached the highest round on the ladder of political distinction; Douglas, who had but one more step to take before reaching the same lofty height; Hardin, who poured out his blood on the plains of Mexico; and Baker and Mulligan, who died in the defence of the liberties of their country. The last-named uttering, with almost his last breath, the immortal order, "Lay me down and save the flag!"

These men, in company with thousands, laid down their lives that we might live. They have all gone by, and their memory lives to teach us that all earthly things await alike the inevitable hour.

"The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

I could here recall to your recollection many distinguished men, who, like Pope and Thomas and Breese, shed lustre upon the bench, the bar, and the councils of the State and Union. But I shall leave them alone in their glory.

Before closing, I must mention the name of one who in an unostentatious way became a benefactor of his nation. It was my privilege to know, and from my business relations with him during almost four years, to admire his kindness of heart; his probity of character, and ability of mind, united to ambitious hope and determination to achieve an honored name. I mean the late George Buchanan Armstrong, founder of the present postal mail-service of the United States, whose monument may be seen within the grounds of the new post-office. The highest post-office officials of Great Britain have testified in writing that his was the most complete system of postal service known. It was original with Mr. Armstrong, and differs fundamentally from the systems of Europe. He was the great-grandson of George Buchanan, a distinguished Scottish poet, and cousin of President James Buchanan. He died of

over-exertion and severe mental application in trying to bring to perfection the system which was the pride of his life.

“ ’Twas thine own genius gave the final blow,  
And helped to plant the wound that laid thee low;  
Thus the struck eagle, stretched upon the plain,  
No more through rolling clouds to soar again,  
Viewed his own feather on the fatal dart,  
And winged the shaft that quivered in his heart.”

Since the foregoing was written, the name of Ambrose Everett Burnside has been added to the roll of the glorious dead. I met him daily during the last summer in *my* native and *his* adopted town. He appeared to be the possessor of robust health and manly beauty. In *his* case, the order of emigration was reversed. He left his birthplace in the far West and turned his face toward the rising sun, to settle on the shores of the Atlantic. Gallantly did he honor the name of Rhode Island. Twice did his adopted State acknowledge her debt of gratitude by making him her governor; and twice did she confer upon him the high honor of senator in Congress. Suddenly was he called from the peaceful scenes of his romantic home on the shores of the Narragansett to join the sad caravan through the pale realms of death. But we know that his knapsack was slung, and that when the drum beat he was ready to march. Sleep, soldier, sleep. “No sound shall awake thee to glory again.”

But our friends and countrymen though dead are not forgotten. Like

“ Patriots they toiled, and in their country's cause  
Served nobly; and their deeds, as they deserve,  
Received proud recompense. We give in charge  
Their names to the sweet lyre. Th' historic muse,  
Proud of ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> treasure, marches with it down  
To latest times; and Sculpture, in her turn,  
Gives bond in stone and ever-during brass  
To guard them, and t' immortalize her trust.”



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